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Soviet 'beams' on embassy

United States Embassy officials in Moscow continued yesterday to refuse all comment on the Los Angeles Times report that staff in the embassy had been given a secret briefing on Friday about the hazards of radiation from Russian surveillance beams.

According to the report the US Ambassador to Moscow, Mr Walter Stoessel, told his staff that two "beams" had been detected by the embassy's anti-bugging equipment, and that the radiation risks were greatest to pregnant wives of staff members, with ultimate risks of leukaemia and other illnesses, including cataracts, skin cancer, and "emotional disturbances." So far, the Russian authorities have made no public mention of the report.

Although the assumption has so far been that the surveillance "beams" are in some

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way connected with the direct bugging of embassy conversations or communications, it seems much more likely that they are concerned with detecting the embassy's own anti-bugging activities, and monitoring both the movement and location of equipment and people within the building, as well as the installation of any new devices.

If the US reports are accurate the "beams" could be ultrasonic, high-frequency radar, or even neutrons — for these particles might be used to provide a crude "X-ray" of a building — although the best bet of all seems to be short-wave radio designed to confuse US anti-bugging detectors.

It is anybody's guess to what extent the "leak" from Moscow to the US press was

designed merely as a way of letting the Russian authorities know that the US embassy was on to them, but if the "beams" turn out to be radio, the hazards — to say the least — have been somewhat overstated.

While there is powerful evidence that long exposure to the high levels of radiation close to radar equipment can be damaging, there is no convincing evidence that exposure to low-level radio waves is in any way harmful.

Although television sets produce low-level X-radiation as a by-product of their high voltage systems, radio "radiation" waves are not really comparable to the radiation from radio-active substances (such as radium and uranium) or from X-ray machines. The American reports say that the embassy

detection systems in Moscow show that the "beams" produce exposure levels below those accepted in Russian industry.

Although this suggests fairly strongly that something other than radio is involved, and the US Embassy in Moscow is said to be installing protective shielding, it seems very unlikely that the US authorities would be unspecific if their embassy was being subjected to beams as dangerous as gamma-rays or neutrons.

According to US reports, however, the US Embassy has known about the surveillance since 1974 and the situation was discussed with the Russian authorities in Moscow by Dr Kissinger, a fortnight ago. According to agency reports, the US Department of State has refused to comment on the subject.

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